

The Slide into War: 1859-Fort Sumter

Politics

By Emil Posey

The 1850s marked our inexorable slide into Civil War. While his predecessor, Franklin Pierce, was no great shakes of a president, James Buchanan was the wrong person at the wrong time if there ever was one. He was fated to become judged as one of the worst presidents in the nation's history. Ironically, his successor, Abraham Lincoln, was the right person at the right time. His election in 1860 triggered Secession, but Buchanan's term was the bridal walk.

The actions Buchanan took during his presidency hastened the coming of the Civil War. He presided over a nation rapidly dividing. His decision to endorse the Constitution written by the pro-slavery settlers in Kansas made him appear to be a supporter of the South and a traitor to the North. According to Dr. Jean H. Baker (Professor of History, Goucher College), "He should be maligned for 'near treason' ... Everything [he did] during the last part of his Administration is so pro-Southern that he does not do in the classic Presidential oath 'preserve and defend and protect the United'." Dr. Eric Foner (Professor of History, Columbia University) observed, "The idea that the president would try to force slavery into a territory where it is clear the majority of the settlers don't want it completely discredits his Administration in the eyes of Northerners, including northern Democrats, not just Republicans."

Buchanan had come to Washington as a northern Democrat who, through training, background and conviction, believed himself well positioned to solve the sectional crisis.

President Buchanan was a lifelong bachelor. Some characterize him as our first gay president, arising from his long-time relationship with William Rufus DeVane King of Alabama. King's niece, Catherine Margaret Ellis, fulfilled the role of First Lady in the Buchanan White House, which marked the beginning of the use of that term. We need not concern ourselves here with this controversy other than to point out that it is a matter debated upon for the past 175 years.

For a good discussion, see

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/175-year-history-examining-bachelor-president-james-buchanans-close-friendship-william-rufus-king-180972992/>

During his term, he came to believe that the fault rested with the extremists in the north who refused to allow southern slaveholders their constitutional right to take slaves into the territories – the aggressive northern Republicans who refused to protect the rights of Southerners. ("Learning from Buchanan", Jean H. Baker, New York Times, February 26, 2011). Newly elected, he thought the crisis would disappear if he maintained a sectional balance in his appointments and could persuade the people to accept constitutional law as the Supreme Court interpreted it.

In his victory speech, President-Elect Buchanan denounced Republicans as a "dangerous" and "geographical" party that had unfairly attacked the South. He declared his intent to destroy sectional parties, North or South, and to restore harmony to the Union under a national, conservative government. To begin the healing process, he filled his cabinet with four Southerners and three

Northerners, the latter considered to be *doughfaces* (Northerners with Southern sympathies).

President Buchanan was inaugurated on March 4, 1857. In his inaugural address, he committed himself to serving only one term. He said Congress should play no role in determining the status of slavery in the states or territories, urged popular sovereignty, and argued that a federal slave code should protect the rights of slave-owners in every

federal territory. He advocated that people accept constitutional law as the Supreme Court interpreted it.

On March 6, 1857, two days after the inauguration, Chief Justice Roger B. Taney (who had administered the oath of office to President Buchanan) delivered the *Dred Scott* decision. The decision held that African Americans were not and never could become US citizens and asserted that Congress had no constitutional power to deprive persons of their property rights in slaves in the territories.

This was the solution to the nation's divisions that President Buchanan had sought, thinking it would permanently put the slavery issue to rest. Not everyone agreed, of course. Southerners were delighted, but the decision created a furor in the North, and the country grew more divided. Then came "Bleeding Kansas", so called because of the extreme amount of sectional violence that went on in the state, perpetrated mostly by outsiders, but certainly with local participants.

The Missouri Compromise of 1820 had prohibited slavery north of the 36°30' parallel (Missouri's southern border). Missouri, though, had been admitted as a slave state in 1821. Kansas was above the slave parallel but was next to the slave state of Missouri. In an era that would come to be known as "Bleeding Kansas," the territory would become a battleground over the slavery question – in effect, a dress rehearsal for the Civil War. Rumors had spread through the South that 20,000 Northerners (an exaggerated number) were descending on Kansas, and in November 1854, thousands of armed Southerners, mostly from Missouri, poured over the line to vote for a proslavery congressional delegate. Only half the ballots were cast by registered voters, and at one location, only 20 of over 600 voters were legal residents. The proslavery forces won the election. On March 30, 1855, another election was held to choose members of the territorial legislature. The Missourians, or "Border Ruffians," again poured over the line. This time, they swelled the numbers from 2,905 registered voters to 6,307 actual ballots cast. Only 791 voted against slavery.

President Buchanan divided the Democrats with his support for the ensuing, pro-slavery Lecompton Constitution, which supported the admission of Kansas as a slave state. However, voters in the territory ultimately rejected the document, and Kansas finally entered the Union as a free state on January 20, 1861. President Buchanan's management of the controversy in Kansas did nothing to settle the slavery issue. It only made it worse. Slavery, couched in the mantra of states' rights, would be the defining issue of the 1860 election.

When Republicans won a plurality in the House in 1858, every significant bill they passed fell before southern votes in the Senate or a Presidential veto. Legislation ground to a stalemated halt.

This period saw the famed Lincoln-Douglas debates. In 1858, the one-term former congressman and Springfield, Illinois attorney, Abraham Lincoln, ran as a Republican against the incumbent Illinois Democrat Stephen Douglas in an effort to unseat him in the Senate. From August to October of that year, they held a series of seven face-to-face debates, with most of the discussion focused on the issue of slavery. Attention grew as the debates continued. Before they were over, the forums were being covered by newspapers across the nation.

Douglas repeatedly tried to brand Lincoln as a dangerous radical who advocated racial equality and disruption of the Union. Lincoln emphasized the moral iniquity of slavery and attacked popular sovereignty for the bloody results it had produced in Kansas and forced Douglas to defend the doctrine of popular sovereignty in the context of slavery.

Douglas's position, while acceptable to many Northern Democrats, angered the South and led to the division of the Democratic Party.

Although he retained his seat in the Senate, narrowly defeating Lincoln when the Illinois state legislature (which then elected US senators) voted 54 to 46 in his favor, Douglas's stature as a national leader of the Democratic Party was greatly diminished. Lincoln, on the other hand, lost the election but gained national recognition, the Lincoln-Douglas Debates often being cited as the instrument that thrust Lincoln into national prominence.

Sectional and pro- and antislavery animosities were deepening and threatening to get out of control. Then, on October 16, 1859, came John Brown's raid on the United States Armory and Arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia to capture and confiscate the arms located there, distribute them among local slaves, and begin armed insurrection. The raid failed, and Brown was captured, subsequently tried, and hanged. The raid, trial, and execution were covered extensively in the press, were the subject of countless heated discussions and debates, and escalated fear throughout the South. With the Haitian Revolution (1791), the German Coast Uprising near Louisiana (1811), and Nat Turner's Rebellion (1831) strong in their minds, many slaveowners feared this latest episode of aggressive violence – initiated, led, and supported by white abolitionists no less – was the harbinger of things to come.

By 1860, it was apparent that Buchanan was not going to be a candidate for re-election. At the Democratic convention, he managed to derail Douglas' campaign to be the sole nominee who would take on Lincoln. (Douglas had defeated Lincoln in the 1858 Senate election in Illinois.) The Democrats were left with two presidential nominees (Douglas and John Breckinridge).

Sectional strife rose to such a pitch by 1860 that national politics were an acrimonious swirl. There was a protracted debate over the House leadership for nearly two months (December 1859 and January 1860). On February 1, the Republicans finally managed the election of a Speaker with 119 votes, the exact number needed to win. The debates in Congress during this period were heated and many members carried weapons. Southern Congressmen talked openly of secession in the event of a Republican presidential victory in the coming November. On February 2, Mississippi Senator Jefferson Davis introduced a series of resolutions calling for a federal law protecting slavery in the territories. The resolutions were passed by the Senate Democratic caucus, an action that further divided the party along sectional lines. On February 27, Lincoln delivered his famous Cooper Union Address in New York City, which presented a compelling case on the Founding Fathers' objections to the spread of slavery. The speech

"Radical" was an inappropriate moniker for Lincoln. Radical Republicans, strictly speaking, were members of the newly formed Republican Party committed to the emancipation of slaves. Even though the whole of the party was looked upon by many as Radical Republicans, Lincoln was not there yet. He believed slavery was wrong, but it was allowed by the Constitution. In a speech in Peoria, Illinois in 1854 he admitted he did not know exactly what should be done about slavery within the current political system. Nor did he believe blacks should have the same social and political rights as whites. In their fourth debate, at Charleston, Illinois, on September 18, 1858, Lincoln made his position clear, "I will say then that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races." It was not until mid-1862 that he finally embraced the idea of emancipation.

<https://www.history.com/news/5-things-you-may-not-know-about-lincoln-slavery-and-emancipation>

was widely reprinted in northern newspapers and helped Lincoln secure his party's presidential nomination.

In January, the Democratic Party of Alabama adopted a resolution instructing the state's delegates to the Convention in Charleston (to be held April 23 -May 3) to "insist" on a clause in the national platform calling for a law to protect slavery in the territories, and to withdraw from the convention if such a clause is rejected. They, along with other disgruntled delegates, did just this on April 30.

On May 9, the newly formed Constitutional Union Party opened its convention in Baltimore. John Bell of Tennessee became its presidential nominee. Comprised mainly of conservative Whigs and Know-Nothings concerned about the gathering crisis, the party advertised itself as an alternative to "Black Republicanism" and Democratic demagoguery. The delegates refused to adopt a platform, instead pledging themselves solely to the preservation of the Union and the Constitution. The following week, on May 16, the Republican convention opened in Chicago. William Seward lost on the third ballot to Lincoln, considered by most members as a political moderate. The party platform called for a higher tariff, a ban on slavery in the territories, federal money for internal improvement projects, and a homestead act. Seward later described Lincoln as "a soldier on the side of freedom in their irrepressible conflict between freedom and slavery".

"... John Brown, [a] very important person in history. Important though for only one episode. Failure in everything in life. Except he becomes the single most important factor, in my opinion, in bringing on the war. This man seized Harper's Ferry on the night of the 16th and 17th of October. Failure of his operation completely. Think how much safer they would have been if they had sensed him as a madman. But they brought him to trial. He used his trial to indict a system. In the South, Southerners began to look, began to feel that too many in the North were looking upon Brown as a hero. The militia system in the South which had been a joke before this ... becomes a viable instrument as the Southern militias begin to take a true form and the South begins to worry about Northerners educating the blacks to murder them in their beds."

"The Civil War, Interview with Ed Bearss"
https://americanarchive.org/catalog/cpb-aacip_509-pk06w9749m

On June 18, the Democratic national convention reconvened in Baltimore after the Charleston impasse. Anti-Douglas delegates from Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Maryland, California, Oregon, Kentucky, Missouri, and Arkansas withdrew from the meeting in order to protest the assembly's decision to seat newly elected, pro-Douglas state delegations. Douglas was nominated as the Democratic Party's candidate by the remaining delegates. Shortly thereafter, a group of disgruntled delegates assembled a competing convention in Baltimore which nominated John C. Breckinridge, a federal slave law supporter, for president. Thus, the Democratic Party split into northern and southern wings, each with its own candidate for the Presidency.

When the Republicans nominated Lincoln, it seemed to them a foregone conclusion that he would be elected even though his name appeared on no southern ballot. President Buchanan hoped for compromise, but secessionist leaders did not want compromise. Rather than accept a

Republican administration, the southern "Fire-Eaters" advocated secession.

The Fire-Eaters were part of the group that walked out of the Democratic convention in Charleston back in April. They were a pro-slavery group led by Robert Barnwell Rhett of South Carolina, Edmund Ruffin of Virginia, Louis T. Wigfall of Texas, and William

Yancey of Alabama, that strongly urged secession. They helped to unleash a chain reaction that eventually led to the formation of the Confederate States of America.

On November 6, Lincoln was elected the sixteenth president of the United States, receiving 1,866,452 popular votes and 180 electoral votes from 17 of the 33 states. Not a single slave state endorsed him. Stephen Douglas received 1,376,957 popular votes and 12 electoral votes; John Breckinridge 849,781 popular votes and 72 electoral votes; and John Bell 588,879 popular votes and 39 electoral votes.

Events became grim. President Buchanan's administration virtually crumbled. On November 10, both of South Carolina's senators resigned their seats. The legislature of South Carolina ordered a convention to meet on December 17 to decide whether the state should remain in the Union, and on November 13 authorized the raising of ten thousand men for the state's defense. The Georgia legislature followed on November 18 by authorizing one million dollars for weapons purchases. On November 23, US Army Major

Robert Anderson issued a report from Charleston identifying Fort Sumter as the key to the defense of the city's harbor, adding that secession was a fait accompli in South Carolina. In December, President Buchanan's cabinet all but disintegrated. On December 8, a group of South Carolina Congressmen urged President Buchanan to relinquish federal property in their state. On December 13, 23 House members and 7 Senators from the South made a public announcement calling for the creation of a Southern Confederacy.

On December 20, the hammer dropped: South Carolina formally seceded. As a lame duck, President Buchanan denied the legality of slavery but did nothing to stop it. Within weeks, six more states left the Union (Alabama, Georgia, Florida, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas). Eight slaveholding states sat on the fence, becoming Border States (Missouri, Arkansas, Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware). In late December, Major Anderson moved his small force from Fort Moultrie to Fort Sumter, both in Charleston harbor.

On February 4, 1861, a convention of the seceded states opened in Montgomery, Alabama as a Peace Convention called by Virginia got underway in Washington. On February 8, the seceded states adopted a provisional constitution for the Confederate States of America. It contained only a few variations from the US Constitution, among which were a clause protecting slavery and one that prohibited tariffs designed to protect domestic industry.

On February 18, 1861, Jefferson Davis was elected president of the Confederacy and was inaugurated eight days later in Montgomery, Alabama. One month after that, on March 4, President Lincoln, after having slipped into Washington in an unmarked train in the dead of night back on February 23, was inaugurated. Buchanan's presidency finally came to an end. On his last day, Buchanan said to Lincoln, "If you are as happy to be entering the presidency as I am of leaving it, you must be a very happy man."

Robert Barnwell Rhett had been a six-term member of the US House of Representatives from South Carolina (1837-1849) and a US Senator from South Carolina (December 1850 – May 1852, completing the term of John C. Calhoun). Edmund Ruffin was a politically active, wealthy Virginia planter and slaveholder. Louis Wigfall was a political activist and US Senator from Texas (December 1859 – March 1861, completing the term of James Pinckney Henderson). William Yancey was a political activities and one-term member of the US House of Representatives from Alabama (1844-1846).

“Happy” surely was not how President Lincoln felt. He was confronted with a nation breaking apart. In his inauguration address, he told the crowd he had no intention of interfering with slavery, but that secession was illegal and the Union perpetual.

The day after his inauguration, President Lincoln learned from Major Anderson that Fort Sumter must either be re-supplied or abandoned within a matter of weeks. The president understood that surrendering the fort would mean a loss of federal sovereignty but sending supplies would likely start a war. He lost sleep over the situation. On March 29, he decided to resupply it (along with Fort Pickens in Pensacola, Florida).

President Lincoln notified South Carolina Governor Francis Pickens on April 6 that he would re-provision Fort Sumter, making it clear that no additional troops would be sent to the fort if supply ships were allowed to land. On April 10, though, Confederate Secretary of War LeRoy Walker authorized Beauregard to use force if the federal government attempted to re-supply Fort Sumter. On April 11, Major Anderson refused a request from the Confederate government to surrender Fort Sumter. The next morning, the Confederate bombardment began.

The crystalizing issue in the sectional turmoil was whether the states individually had the discretionary right to leave (to secede from) the Union. Exacerbating this was the occasional federal law and policy that would benefit one section of the country at the expense of another. Governing was a difficult balancing act often not done well despite the best of intentions (and intentions were not always pristine). Imbalances led to disputes that were, in turn, inflamed by public oratory within and between states and the print media, between regional and national political groups, and in Congress. The states’ rights controversy (focusing on secession) was the political underpinning of the North-South dispute – a power struggle to see which part of the country would have control. Slavery was its social and economic underpinnings (albeit this is a contentious view).

The notion of secession — the right of states to secede from the Union — has a long and deep history in this country, but more as a threat rather than as an actual dissolution of the Union. Pro-secessionists found philosophical justification for altering or abolishing a government and instituting a new one in the Declaration of Independence. Those who held that the Union was simply a compact among the states argued that states could secede from that compact just as they had earlier acceded to it.

With President-Elect Lincoln's victory, talk of secession and disunion reached a boiling point, and President Buchanan was forced to address it in his final message to Congress. In it, he denied the legal right of states to secede but opined the federal government legally could not prevent them. He placed the blame for the crisis solely on "intemperate interference of the Northern people with the question of slavery in the Southern States," and suggested that if they did not "repeal their unconstitutional and obnoxious enactments ... the injured States, after having first used all peaceful and constitutional means to obtain redress, would be justified in revolutionary resistance to the Government of the Union." His address satisfied no one.